

## **Matthew 18. 15-20 Trinity 13, September 6 2020**

This is a gospel passage in which Jesus is giving advice about disputes or quarrels within the early church community. I think there are two problems with it, which I will try to illustrate and comment on. The first problem is one of a fair and just process: does it sound ok to us that if I think you've done me wrong, I first speak to you alone, and then with others present, and then if you don't listen, you will be expelled from this congregation – excommunicated? Our common law sense of justice, our Anglo-Saxon belief in innocence until proved guilty may recoil a little bit here. Who is going to examine where the original fault lies, because we've all experienced the "You said then I said then you said" sort of engagement?

On the other hand, in reality, church quarrels are not actually handled in the fair and even-handed way we are extolling. More likely, I don't go to you directly to say anything. Instead, I seek out a third party, probably not one of your supporters, and begin to chatter, exaggerating for effect if necessary; more subtly, I speak to the priest or elders with the immortal phrase: "People are saying that so-and-so ..." I begin that process of gently but distinctly undermining the reputation of the person with whom I have an issue. I wonder if that rings any bells.

By comparison with this actuality, what Jesus is recommending is distinctly healthy, and may result in an adult conversation and proper resolution.

The second problem with this passage is a kind of internal contradiction. At the point of expulsion, the wayward member is to be 'as a Gentile or tax collector'. Now I wonder if Matthew is writing tongue-in-cheek, because he may well himself have been a tax collector, and the consistent teaching of Jesus is to include those who are often excluded by Jewish Law. Two responses here: the passages which follow in St Matthew's Gospel (which we have on the next couple of Sundays) make it explicit that forgiveness knows no limits – Jesus replies to Peter that he should metaphorically forgive seventy times seven; and the parable of the debtor servant encourages us to practise with others the infinite forgiveness that God offers. It is as if these comments about church disputes are a prelude to more substantial teaching about forgiveness in general.

Yet I still think there are things for us to learn here about our church, our parish community. This learning begins at the point of saying that conflict or disagreement is part of the human condition, in and outside the church. That's uncomfortable for some Christians, which actually makes addressing conflict in church harder. There's also everything to be said for avoiding the kind of gossipy reaction to falling out, and instead grasping the rather difficult issue of a direct conversation. Contrast an unhealthy with a healthy way of dealing with conflict. The upside is that this kind of adult to adult behaviour is likely to prevent worsening relations, may solve the problem early on, and even perhaps lead to a new understanding. The stress on love in St Paul's *Letter to the Romans* is the key here, with the interesting insight that sometimes conflict and love are not opposites.

*Fr David*